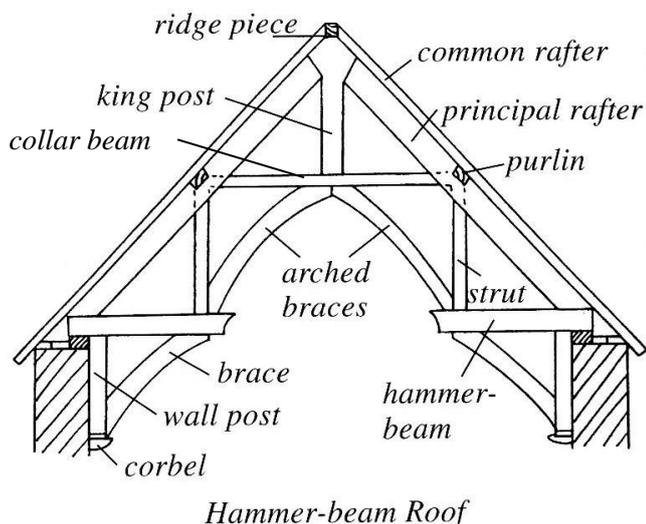


THE HAMMERBEAM ROOF IN THE CHANCEL

The chancel of All Saints' Church has an interesting, if not terribly distinguished, hammer beam roof. So, let us start by clarifying what a hammerbeam roof is. The schematic drawing below¹ shows the main features that might be found in a hammerbeam roof, although we shall see shortly that the one in All Saints is of a much simpler construction.

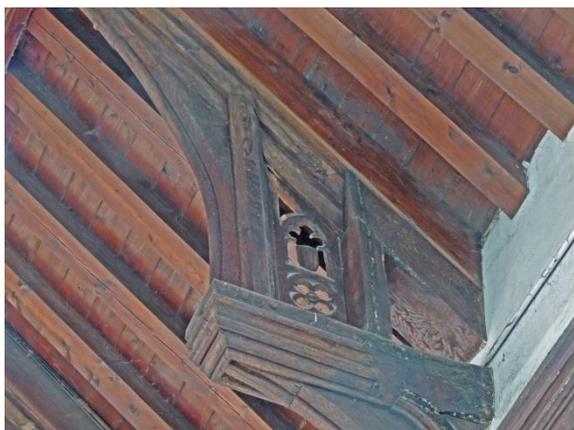


See how the two hammerbeams project, at wall-plate level, from both walls (rather like a tie-beam with the middle cut away). These short beams are supported by curved braces from the wall, which effectively form a bracket, and a further structure can then be built on top of them. Such a roof provides a span that is greater than the length of any individual piece of timber.

Note how the bottoms of the wall posts are supported on corbels, which are blocks (usually of stone) which project from the wall. Such stone corbels, three of them carved, can be seen on the south aisle wall. However, the corbels in the chancel are made of wood, and they are all carved – at least they all were at some time.

In fact the design of the hammerbeam roof at All Saints is very simple indeed. There is no collar beam, much less a king post, just the strut (or hammer-post) together with a smaller subsidiary strut (sometimes called an ashlar piece) supporting the principal rafter (see photograph).

You can see that in the diagram there is a triangular open space (the spandrel) below the hammerbeam, i.e. the space between the brace, the hammerbeam and the wall post. Such a spandrel is often filled by a decorative panel, such as the magnificent dragon in Dragon Hall, Norwich. But at All Saints this area is small, solid and without decoration.



Now, the triangular space above the hammerbeam, i.e. the space between the hammerbeam, the strut and the principal rafter, is often also decorated, and this is the case at All Saints. In fact, as shown in the picture, not the whole of the triangular area is decorated, just the roughly rectangular area between the two struts. Actually, two different patterns of decoration are employed.

There are other hammerbeam roofs in Norfolk, such as those at Necton and Cawston, which are very similar in their basic method of construction to ours at Swanton Morley, but they are both beautifully decorated, with a profusion of carved angels.

In fact, Norfolk is famous for its fine hammerbeam roofs and angels. So, why should we bother to look at our modest roof? The answer lies in the simple charm of the wooden corbels. As I have said before, the chancel was built later than the nave, and almost certainly on a much more restricted budget. So the builders couldn't afford painted stars and gilded angels; the best they could do was to find some local craftsman who could have a bit of fun decorating the ends of the wooden corbels. Next time I shall show you some pictures of these corbels.

1. This diagram was taken from the *Sutton Companion to Churches* by Stephen Friar